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*Article*

## **My story, my life, my identity**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the author looks at the use of the methods of life stories or biographical interviewing in research on personal and social identity. She presents the rationale behind the use of the method and its basic procedures and then moves on to a discussion of the concept of identity. To demonstrate the relevance of this method for the study of identity construction, she presents examples from three life story interviews with Jewish Israeli young adults, all born in the mid 1970s. The article ends with a discussion of the implications of using life stories for understanding an individual's sense of identity.

**Keywords:** life story, biography, identity

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### **Introduction**

In this article, I focus on using the life story method for exploring the expression of personal and collective identities. To gain a deeper understanding of how the life story method and the concept of identity can tie together, I will present examples of how identities are expressed in the life story interviews of three Jewish Israelis born in the early 1970s, around the time of the Yom Kippur War (1973).

I chose to study this method and to demonstrate its use for understanding this cohort for two reasons—one more academic and one more personal. For academic reasons, I believe it is worthwhile to explore the use of life stories in the study of issues of identity, as the two areas can inform and enhance one another. By bringing the two areas together, we will not only learn sensitive approaches to the study of identity but also, I hope, learn more about aspects of identity. There are a number of reasons for choosing the population that I did, and they are detailed below.

#### **Academic and personal reasons for choice of cohort—Jewish Israeli young adults**

I have chosen to look at the identity of Jewish Israeli young adults who were born after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (in 1967), because this cohort grew up in an Israel that not only differed significantly from that of their parents' generation but also differed from the commonly held perception of Israel, held by those of us living in the Diaspora (Chaitin, 2004). As opposed to their

elders, the occupation of the Palestinian people, and the conflict that has ensued because of the continued occupation, has always been part of the “normal” social and political reality for these young adults.

The social reality of these young adults is also connected to the fact that since the decade of their birth, Israeli society has been characterized by increased Westernization and has moved away from an emphasis on Zionist, socialistic, and communal needs and identity—which characterized the Yishuv (Jewish prestate Israel) and the early years of statehood (Eisenstadt, 1973; Sachar, 1996; Segev, 1998; Zerubavel, 2002)—to an emphasis on individual needs, aspirations, and development. Pre-1970 Israel manifestly proclaimed the value of socialistic and communal ways of life over capitalistic and individualistic lifestyles. During the first 25 years of statehood, Israel was busy with the establishment of its infrastructures, engaged in a number of wars with her Arab neighbors, and also taken up with absorbing and settling massive numbers of Jewish immigrants from around the world (Bickerton & Klausner, 2002). It is safe to assume that these national missions could be accomplished only through strong social support and reinforcement of common, supraordinate goals above individual ones.

Jewish Israeli young adults have been the topic of prior research studies, albeit mostly from cohorts born before the years under discussion in this article. Published research has centered on the place of the Holocaust in young adult lives (e.g., Bar-On, 1995; Chaitin, 2004; Feldman, 2002), the connection between military service and issues such as the Arab/Palestinian/Israeli conflict and gender identities (e.g., Helman, 1999; Linn, 1986, 1996; Lomsky-Feder, 2004; Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 1999; Sasson-Levy, 2003); the impact of the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin on young people (Shapira, 2000), and the place of the Sabra identity in the construction of Jewish Israeli identity (Almog, 2000; Moore & Bar-On, 1996). In the section below on the concept of identity, I will take a closer look at the concept of the Sabra and its connection to the development of Jewish Israeli identity.

As noted above, my interest in exploring Jewish Israeli young adults is not only academic but also personal. After emigrating from the United States to Israel in 1972, I settled on a kibbutz.<sup>1</sup> Two of my children were born in the mid 1970s, and many of my close friends’ children were born during these years as well. For 10 years, I worked as a mitapelet (a child caretaker) in the kibbutz’s informal educational system. Therefore, this is an age cohort that I know well. Furthermore, for a number of years, I was an instructor at Ben-Gurion University, and as a result, I had a great deal of contact with Jewish Israelis born during these years. In one sense, then, these are “my” children. I have always been fascinated with their perception of Israeli society and culture, and their sense of identity within this context.

I will now move on to a presentation of the rationale and method of life story/biographical research. Then, I will look at various perspectives of the concept of identity. After discussing connections between the life story method of interviewing and the concept of identity, I will present excerpts from three interviews with Jewish Israeli young adults that demonstrate how life stories can shed light on the perception of one’s identity. I will end the article with a discussion of the implications of using life story interviews for understanding an individual’s sense of identity.

### **Life story interviewing**

I would like to begin with the explanation and rationale for using life story, or biographical interviewing,<sup>2</sup> a method first introduced by the German sociologist Schutze (1983, 1984)—when attempting to understand the meanings that individuals give to their lives and the social phenomena that they have experienced. As researchers in different disciplines and geographical areas have shown, the life story method can be an extremely sensitive method for accomplishment of this goal (e.g., Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Lomsky-Feder, 2004; Rosenthal, 1993, 1998, 2004; Wengraf, 2001). The life story method is classified as one type of phenomenological approach to research (van Manen, 1996, 2002); that is, it focuses on the understandings and significance that people give to their life experiences.

When doing phenomenological research, the researcher wishes to learn what the individual has lived through, how and where the experiences that the person has had figures into their lives, and how he or she understands life in light of those experiences.

One major underlying assumption of the biographical mode of interviewing is that each individual has a unique story to tell and a unique understanding of that experience. Therefore, to get at that experience, we must find ways that allow the individual to tell us about his or her life experiences in as full and open a way as possible that allows this uniqueness to find expression. Imposing our theoretical/conceptual frameworks on the individual during the interview process will hinder this process (Rosenthal, 1993).

A second, complementary underlying assumption of the biographical method of interviewing is that although the life story of each biographer is unique, the stories are also embedded in particular social and cultural contexts. Therefore, by studying these stories, we gain not only understandings of the individual and his or her experiences but also insights into the particular social structures and dynamics and cultural values, mores, and norms in which the individual lives (Rosenthal 1993, 1998). A third assumption of this method is that people do not speak in random, unconnected sentences; when they relate their life story, they are choosing what to say and how to say it. Therefore, the life story can be interpreted and analyzed systematically.

In sum, then, the life story method of interviewing and analysis assumes that to understand the meaning that people give to their life experiences, we must have a way of eliciting stories about their life experiences and then uncover these personal and social/cultural meanings through systematic interpretations of these stories.

### **Biographical interviewing: The basic procedure**

Life story interviewing is an extremely open-ended method of eliciting information from a research participant. At the beginning of the interview, after explaining the overall purpose of the study and obtaining the person's consent to participate in the study, the researcher asks the interviewee—termed the autobiographer—a variant of the following question: “Please tell me your life story, whatever you think is relevant.” The interviewer then sits quietly and does not disturb the interviewee's narrative whatsoever until he or she has come to the end of his or her life story (usually signified by a remark such as, “That's it. That's my story. Do you have any other questions?”) If the autobiographer has difficulty in getting going and asks the interviewer to provide some guidance, the researcher is trained to reply with a statement such as, “Talk about whatever you think is important—the choice is yours.” The idea here is to not lead the autobiographers in any way but to allow them to choose freely how and what to talk about.

Life story interviews can range from 10 minutes to many hours (e.g., Bar-On, 1995; Chaitin, 2003; Chaitin & Bar-On, 2001; Rosenthal, 1993), depending on the interviewee and the situational context and types of field constraints. As a rule, after the autobiographer has finished relating his or her story, the researcher will then ask intrinsic questions—that is, questions that arise from the interview (e.g., “You noted that your high school years were happy ones. Could you please tell me a happy story from that period in your life?”). These help the researcher flesh out details that he or she might feel are missing to get a good sense of the person. In some cases, the interviewee also prepares extrinsic questions: questions that are of particular interest to him or her for the study. For example, in my research on the long-term effects of the Holocaust on the descendants of survivors, I would often ask the grandchildren of survivors if they knew what their grandparent had lived through during the war, if the individual did not mention it beforehand (Chaitin, 2003, 2004).

The biographical interview is tape-recorded, either by audio or visual means, so that the researcher can undertake an in-depth interpretation of the material. A word-for-word transcription is made of the

interview, and it is from this text that the researcher searches to connect the experiences that the autobiographer has shared and the meanings that he or she gives to them. The researcher does not, however, need to look only for psychological impacts but might also analyze the data for other impacts, such as cultural, sociological, historical, and educational (Chaitin, 2002).

### **Issues of identity**

Because I am addressing expressions of personal and collective identity among Jewish Israeli young adults, I will now look briefly at the concept of identity. I will begin with some comments about identity in general and then take a closer look at research on Jewish Israeli identity in particular.

There is much literature on the conceptualization and construction of identity that is rooted in the study of group identity. This literature reflects two basic assumptions. The first assumption is that an individual's identity is composed of multiple identities: personal identity, which consists of personal, idiosyncratic aspects; and social identity, which is based on social aspects, such as group membership (e.g., Brown, 1997; Tajfel, 1972, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1985; Turner & Oakes, 1989). The self-concept can be conceived of as a cognitive structure consisting of a set of concepts subjectively available to a person in attempting to define him- or herself (Gecas, 1982; Gergen, 1971; Hogg & Abrams, 1988), or, as Burke (2004) has stated,

Identities are the sets of meanings people hold for themselves that define “what it means” to be who they are as persons, as role occupants, and as group members. These meanings constitute...an identity standard...[which] serves as a reference with which persons compare their perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the interactive situation. (pp. 6, 9)

The second assumption is that representations of the other and the self, and the changes over time concerning these representations, play a central role in the process of the creation of personal and collective identity. Over the life course, we meet different significant others that both influence and are influenced by us, and we construct our identity in relation to these others. As Stryker (1980) stated, many identities are based on people's locations within the overall social structure and the roles that they and others play within that system. However, Gergen (1991) has reminded us that these roles are not always stable, and therefore, the borders of the self will change, depending on circumstances and on time.

According to postmodern approaches, the construction of one's identity is a dynamic process that develops and changes over the life course of the individual (Bicket, 2001; Giddens, 1991). A crucial aspect of this theory is the fluctuating nature of identity. Although people tend to identify with many social groups, based on factors such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, national origin, and so on, these factors become salient at different times and in different ways, thus contributing to the fluid nature of identity construction. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), when a particular group identity becomes salient at a particular time—for whatever reason—the sentiments, emotions, and behaviors of a member of the salient group will tend to be affected and guided by the norms and aspirations of that group. However, the degree to which an individual identifies with a given social category is associated with the internalization of the social category's goals, values, norms, and traits (Ashford & Mael, 1989); with the degree of commitment the person feels toward the group (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982); and with the degrees of cohesion, cooperation, and altruism toward other group members (Billig & Tajfel, 1973).

Another way to think about identity is to note that it is also a means by which the individual connects the real to the imagined and the concrete to the symbolic in his or her perception of the social world (Bhabha, 1990). This approach further emphasizes the ongoing dialogue that occurs between intrapersonal

(psychological) and interpersonal (social and cultural) components in the construction and understanding of identity (Sarup, 1996).

When we bring together the personal and the social aspects of identity, we can see that, at times, the individual will stress his or her personal identity and at others, his or her collective sense. As Brown (1997) has noted, an individual who is motivated to preserve and enhance his or her self-image based primarily on personal identity is operating as a unique person. In this instance, the need for self-esteem is unambiguously located at the level of the individual. On the other hand, an individual who is motivated to preserve and enhance his or her self-image based primarily on social identity is operating as a representative of a social category. In such a case, the person, in effect, behaves as that social category, and his or her need for self-esteem is also identifiable as the social category's need for self-esteem. Thus, as Turner (1987) has noted, there is a continuous reciprocal interaction and interdependence between individuals' psychological processes and their activity, relations, and products as groups.

When the group replaces the individual as the center of concern, however, this does not disrupt the discourse of individuality. The group, like the individual, is perceived as being imbued with good and evil intent, held blameworthy, deemed worthy of rights, and so on. This approach reflects Vygotsky's idea (1978) that the self is conceptualized not only as encompassing autonomous or self-contained cognitive processes but also in a more socialized way. According to this perspective, there is nothing in thought that is not first in society; the self is conceptualized as dialogically constituted (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Sampson, 1993; Shotter, 1993).

In sum, identity has both personal and collective aspects, and is a dynamic process that unfolds over the person's lifetime. At times, the social aspect of identity will be highly stressed, whereas at others, the personal components will gain salience. The borders between the two will not always be clear and well defined; one often blurs into the other, adding a sense of fluidity, change, conflict, and acceptance.

### **The construction and development of Jewish Israeli identity**

As Zerubavel (2002) has noted, in the early and mid years of Zionistic thought and philosophy, mainstream discourse often centered on the construction of a new Jewish identity, which was articulated most powerfully in Israelis' desires to dissociate themselves from their Jewish past of exile. Influenced by anti-Semitic depictions of European Jews, exiled Jews were often portrayed as uprooted, cowardly, weak, and helpless in the face of persecution, and were also seen as being either interested mainly in materialistic gains or excessively immersed in religion. In contrast, the Sabra (Almog, 2000)—the new Jew—was characterized as young and robust, daring and resourceful, direct and down-to-earth, honest and loyal, ideologically committed and ready to defend his or her people to the bitter end.

The Mythological Sabra was an ideal type; it was a fictive hegemonic identity that reflected the cultural and collective background, values, and aspirations of the European founders of the State (Zerubavel, 2002). Although this image did not often mesh with the actual cultural diversity of Israeli immigrant society, and often conflicted with traumatic parts of Jewish history, such as the Holocaust (Moore & Bar-On, 1996), it was a powerful cultural construct that, for many years, served as a self-image and educational model for the socialization of both Israeli-born youth and new immigrants.

Bar-On (1999), in his work on the development of Jewish Israeli identity, has conceptualized this identity as going through three stages. The first stage, termed the monolithic stage of identity, recruited this image of the Sabra to the disdain and exclusion of all others who did not fit this mold (i.e., Mizrahi [Sephardic] Jews, ultrareligious Jews, Palestinians, etc.). The valued identity was that of this New Jew, leaving little, if any, place for others. The monolithic identity dominated Israeli culture and society for approximately 30 years after statehood. The second stage, termed the stage of *hitporerut* (the disintegration stage),

heralded the disintegration of this dominant identity. Some signposts of this disintegration included the rise of social movements, such as the movement that embraced Mizrahi Jews (beginning with the Israeli Black Panthers movement), the mainstreaming of certain sectors of religious Jewish factions (as in the political rise of Gush Emunim [the Bloc of the Faithful]), and the questioning by Jewish young adults, at the time, who found it morally difficult to accept parts of the Israeli military and political agenda and actions, that occurred during the Lebanese War and the first Intifada. The third stage, which was an outgrowth of the second stage and which became evident during the years of the Oslo peace accords, was termed the multivoice stage. Bar-On (1999) sees this stage as one in which Jewish Israelis are willing and interested in embracing aspects of the “otherness” within themselves, no longer needing to separate themselves categorically from the previous “enemies.” Today, after nearly 4 years of renewed violence between the Israelis and Palestinians, signs of monolithic identity have appeared again, at least vis-à-vis the Palestinian other. This stage can be termed neomonolithic.

In her essay on the changing identity of Jewish Israelis from prestate Israel until the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin (in 1995), Shapira (2000) asked if there is a common Israeli identity today and what is an Israeli? Is he or she

a settler on the West Bank, in military fatigues and tallith, with skull cap and automatic rifle? An ultra-Orthodox youth from B'nei B'rak dutiful to the directives of his Hasidic rebbe? A youngster from the Sheinkin Street bohemian milieu in downtown Tel Aviv with a weird, attention-grabbing hair style? A newcomer immigrant from Russia proud of his language and culture? Or one from Ethiopia who has struggled for recognition as a Jew by the Chief Rabbinate? An Ashkenazi who loves classical music, or an Oriental Jew who prefers Eastern rhythms and riffs? Or maybe there exists a silent Israeli majority, secular in outlook yet wishing to keep a link to ancient Jewish tradition, who long for peace with security, who want economic progress—or simply just to get on with their lives, like any human being? And what about the Arab citizens of the state? And of course, we could have framed the whole passage in gendered terms, shifting the focus to the other 50 percent of the population that is not male. (pp. 663-664)

When we look at the development of Jewish Israeli identity over the decades, then, we can see that it has undergone changes and that the hegemonic image of the Sabra can no longer capture the essence and dynamics of Jewish Israeli identity. This change and fluidity mirrors the conceptualization of identity in general, thus demonstrating that one’s sense of personal and social/collective identity is a process, one that changes and unfolds over time.

### **The connection between the life story and construction of identity**

When a researcher asks a participant to relate his or her life story, the process of telling the story and its outcome (the completed life story interview) is a construction of the lived life. This includes both the experiences that the person has lived through and the ways in which the individual understands the meanings that these experiences have had for him or her. Some theoreticians have averred that the life story is not only a recounting of one’s life but is actually a process by which individuals construct their identity (Botella, 1997; Fischer-Rosenthal & Alheit, 1995). As the narratives unfold, the individuals validate their sense of self, thus reinforcing the feeling—both in themselves and in the listener—that an identity is in the process of being constructed through the vehicle of the storytelling. The life story method, which calls for the researcher to allow the autobiographer to tell his or her story in an uninterrupted manner, inherently allows for and, indeed, encourages, a dynamic and flowing telling. Therefore, this method can be seen as being extremely relevant and sensitive for the study of people’s sense of identity—which is also perceived of as having a dynamic nature of its own.

### **Three examples: Expressions of identity in the life stories of Jewish Israeli young adults**

I will now present short excerpts from life story interviews with young Jewish Israelis, all of whom were born after the Yom Kippur War. The examples are drawn from a collection of interviews that were gathered, for different research studies, at Ben-Gurion University between the years 1990 and 2000. Although these interviews were gathered for different research reasons, what they all have in common is that they began with the request from the interviewer to “tell me your life story, whatever you think is relevant.”

It is important to note that there is no intention in this article to report the results of a study; my aim, rather, is to provide examples of how expressions of identity look in life story interviews with Jewish Israeli young adults. Furthermore, the three examples chosen for presentation here come from interviews with secular Ashkenazi Jewish Israelis (that is, of European origin) and, therefore, do not reflect cultural life experiences of Mizrahi, or religious Jewish, Israeli young adults. Therefore, I would like to stress that it is not my intent to generalize from these three examples to the entire cohort under discussion. I chose to present excerpts from these three interviews because they appeared to offer three different ways of understanding one’s identity. The interviewees were not contacted with information about the analysis; therefore, these analyses remain my interpretation alone.

Let us begin with Amit.<sup>3</sup> Amit was 24 years old and was completing his undergraduate degree in political science at the time of his interview. He begins his interview with the following words:

I was born on the third day of the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, in Jerusalem, in Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital. At that time, my father was on the front and my mother was alone...simultaneously my parents had an idea; they thought of the same name, and when my father called...the night of the birth, then together they said on the phone “Amit” and then they decided to call me Amit and it turned out that in the [army] radio, that was my father’s code name...and that’s the name they gave me.

Amit begins his life story with the story of his name, which ties him directly to the Israeli army and to the Yom Kippur War. His name, the one by which people identify him and the name with which he identifies, inextricably joins the personal (his birth, his mother’s being alone) with the collective (the war, his father is in the army, and the ties between the army and Amit). Zerubavel (2002) has noted the important social significance that changing one’s name that was given in the Diaspora to a Hebrew name had for Jewish new immigrants to Israel. This was a sign of one’s embracement of a new identity—that of the Sabra. Amit was born in Israel and was given a Hebrew name; therefore, he did not need to adopt a new one. However, by beginning his interview with an in-depth story about his naming, which is tied directly to one of Israel’s major wars, he expresses the belief that his name had not only significance for him and his parents but a collective significance as well. Amit continues:

At the age of three...we moved...to Sde Boker,<sup>4</sup> that’s where I lived my whole life...if we are talking about experiences that shape [you] or things like that or important things that happened to me, it was during those years...the desert atmosphere was very special, my parents were educators all of their lives...they dedicated and still dedicate [themselves] to the imbuing of values, the imbuing of culture, love of Israel, everything that is connected to this...it was there really, that everything that is...connected to Israel...to the history of the Jewish people...and to everything that is connected to them, there was the formation that the most important thing, from my point of view...because to get up in the morning...and you walk out of the house and all of this thing is laid out...all of the power of this space, Ben-Gurion and the beginning of the State, and the establishment of the State and everything that is connected to it, that was actually something that I breathed in every day.

When we read through Amit's life story, the integration between the personal and collective aspects of his identity seems to be complete. He speaks of education, values, the legacy of Ben-Gurion, love of the country, and Jewish and Israeli history. Indeed, there are very few instances of separate presentation of collective versus personal self. Although Amit does talk later on in the interview, which lasted for nearly 2 hours, about his personal goals for the future, which also tie to the collective—he wants to be an Israeli diplomat—most of his stories are related to his collective experiences. He talks at length about his education, the army, and in his work for the Jewish Agency.<sup>5</sup> For example, Amit goes into great detail about his army service, tying his service, which was spent mainly in the education department after he hurt his knee during his basic training, to “great” and heroic moments in Israeli history—such as the Entebbe raid<sup>6</sup>—so even though Amit was not physically fit to participate in such a dramatic and dangerous military expedition, he uses it as one of his anchors for his sense of identity.

The second and very different example comes from an interview with a young woman. Lee was 25 and a student in social work when she was interviewed. Whereas Amit was brought up in a desert community that boasted a manifest and clear educational agenda, Lee was brought up in a middle class suburb of Tel Aviv. Lee's story connects to Israeli norms and experiences. These experiences include the fact that her father was a career officer in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), her own army service, and debates between religious and secular camps in Israel (her husband is a *chozer b'she'aila*—the term for someone who has left his or her Orthodox roots and become secular). However, her story has a much stronger personal thrust to it than Amit's. For example, although Lee notes a number of times in the interview that her father was a career officer, she never mentions what his job was in the military, nor does she recount tales of “heroism.” Furthermore, she also talks at length about her personal aspirations and plans for the future: the trips abroad that she took with her boyfriend/husband, the need to be her own person, and the conflicts that she has had with her parents as she seeks to choose study and career paths for herself that do not always meet her parents' expectations and wishes.

However, as in Amit's case, Lee's personal story also converges with the collective, which is clearly expressed in her recounting of a traumatic experience that she had as an 11-year-old girl, when she was attacked and almost raped by a Palestinian. Lee related the following story:

When I was in the sixth grade...I went through the experience of an attempted rape from a stranger, an Arab from the [occupied] territories...something very...traumatic. This wasn't some sexual harassment, but something very serious and he sat in jail for many years...they searched for him for a long time, they knew who he was because I identified him from the [police] pictures, and he is a resident of the territories, and in the end they found him because the army searched for him...I was a child and in order to understand these things, it's interesting...that I understood that this event was...it's very funny today, I don't understand...he said...“All of the Jewish women are whores”...for some reason I decided that it was due to political reasons...it was in the news a long time...and it was also...part of the turn that my family made, because after it, we decided to go into family therapy...my father had a very difficult time with this...that's it, that's how I had it for a number of years that...from a social standpoint, I blossomed...everyone knows and when everyone knows who I am...it created in them admiration. I don't know how to understand this... but ... during the years afterward, I had it...very good with everyone from a social standpoint, better than what I had in elementary school.

When Lee told me her life story, her main narrative was quite short—about 15 minutes long. As I went back with her over the “headlines” she had given me (e.g., “I went to elementary school and then I went to middle school”), I asked her an intrinsic question; I asked if she could tell me about an experience from her elementary school years. Lee then chose the story of the attack and attempted rape. As soon as Lee



told the story of this trauma from her youth, she then used this story to direct the rest of her life story. Every additional experience somehow tied back to this traumatic event and wove the personal (“I became very popular”; “We went for family therapy”) to the collective (“I decided that it was connected to political reasons”).

When Lee discussed her army service, she continued to tie the experience of the attack to her opinions about the occupation of the Palestinian people. Lee spent a few weeks in the West Bank, serving in a jail that held Palestinian prisoners. When she walked by the prisoners, seeing them in their cells and behind the barbed wire, Lee noted that she felt deep discomfort at the sight of people caged “like animals.” Lee went on then to say that even though it had been a Palestinian man who had attacked her as a child, she did not bear the Palestinian people any ill will, and that it did not affect her political stance.

On one level, Lee tries to separate her belief that the Palestinians are entitled to their own state and to full human and civil rights from her memories of being brutally attacked by a Palestinian man. However, if we choose not only to take Lee’s assertion at its face value but to look at other interpretations as well—ones that Lee might feel uncomfortable about or be unable to verbalize (Josselson, 2004)—we can also interpret her story as showing that the attack might have made her wary of and angry toward Palestinians in general, thus leading her to associate them with “animals.” In either case, the personal and the collective strands of identity here appear to run parallel to one another, neither meeting nor clashing. In short, what we hear in Lee’s story is a more separate sense of the personal and the social than we do in Amit’s narrative.

A third and final example comes from Ziv’s interview. Ziv, who was born and raised on a kibbutz, was 27 at the time of his interview. Whereas I knew Amit and Lee from my work at the university, I knew Ziv from my kibbutz. Ziv, like Amit, ties his story to the collective—but this time, it is the kibbutz collective that takes center stage in the construction of his personal and collective identity. After I asked Ziv to tell me his life story, this is what he said:

My life story, that is a difficult question...I was born in Israel, in a kibbutz, kibbutz, kibbutz X...life in the kibbutz...wow...I don’t like to answer this question because now I have to go over my life...kibbutz education with everything that this means, the regional school that is...a school for the agricultural settlements, a kibbutz school, I have more a tendency for the academic...afterward I did a year of national service in a town in the Negev, a chapter in life, afterward four and a half years in the army, in a battle unit...after being discharged I came to the kibbutz, I gave a year and a half for the good of the kibbutz, I took a trip abroad for a year, like most of the young adults...I came back, I worked a bit outside [of the kibbutz] in Haifa...I did not get everything that I could have out of this part and I returned to the kibbutz in order to be eligible for the study program that the kibbutz gives people who were born and raised on the kibbutz, now I am studying the first year of Chinese medicine, that’s it, you’ve got me now [laughter].

In Amit’s story, we saw his acceptance and embracing of his Israeli identity, and in Lee’s story we see how the personal and the collective intersect, when a personal trauma has a collective twist, and, at times, run parallel to one another, when she described her army experiences, her political views, and the attack she suffered when she was a child. In both cases, it appears as if she accepts equally both personal and collective aspects of her identity, with no expression of conflict between the two. However, in Ziv’s story, something else emerges. In his interview, we see a deep connection to his Israeli and kibbutz identity (in his very short main narrative, he mentions the word kibbutz 10 times!), but we also hear an expression of inner conflict that he has with this part of this identity. This is evident in his words, which note that he does not like to talk about it (“because now I need to go over my life”), and we get the sense that he feels that he might have “missed” something (“I did not get everything that I could have out of that part”). We

can understand Ziv's choice to study Chinese medicine as also reflecting his personal goals that mix both the personal and the collective. Later on in the interview, when Ziv talks about how he came to the decision to study Chinese medicine, he notes that it was important for him to find a profession that encompasses body and soul, one in which he can connect to and work with people on a daily basis—reflective, in no small part, of what he calls his kibbutz upbringing. With this, from his interview, it appears as if he is not considering making the kibbutz his permanent home, as he feels now that he wants to get more out of the personal expression of life that has yet to be fully realized or satisfied.

From Ziv's words, one gets the impression that he is engaged in an emotionally difficult task that he has not yet mastered. He appears to be trying to construct a coherent identity from a number of fragments: one that will take into account the different others that he feels are part of him (Bar-On, 1999) and the diverse aspects of Jewish Israeli identity (Shapira, 2000). His fluctuation and conflict between what he feels he "ought" to do (based on his strict kibbutz educational upbringing) and what he would like to do (based on his experiences outside of the kibbutz) is expressed throughout his story.

### **Discussion**

In this article, two separate yet related concepts were brought together: the life story method and the concept of identity. As Fischer-Rosenthal and Alheit (1995) have noted, one's biographical account is one's identity; the two cannot be separated. Furthermore, as Rosenthal (1997) further stressed, people's national and social identity is shaped and reshaped by their personal history as well as by the history of the world during their lifetime. People's identity is based on their life story, in the sense that by presenting an autobiography, they come to terms with the various components and conflicts of this identity, parallel to the lifelong process of becoming what and who they are.

From the short examples presented from interviews with two Jewish Israeli young men and one young woman, we could see the interplay between the personal and collective aspects of identity. Sometimes, this was expressed as an almost complete enmeshment of the two (the case of Amit); sometimes expressed as intertwining or as running parallel to one another (the case of Lee), and sometimes expressed as a conflict and yearning (the case of Ziv). In all cases, the dynamic and evolving nature of the identity was also evident, though it was definitely more so in the life story interviews with Lee and Ziv than with Amit, who appears to have constructed his identity closely around his Israeli collective sense of self, one reminiscent of the dominant Sabra identity of earlier years (Almog, 2000; Shapira, 2000).

If we tie these understandings to Bar-On's (1999) conceptualization of the development of Jewish Israeli identity, we can aver that Amit tends more toward a monolithic stance, with Lee and Ziv expressing an identity that does not seek to embrace the "typical" Sabra identity, as they aim toward acquiring a more multivoiced identity. Furthermore, if we look at these young adults' life stories through the prism of Shapira's (2000) question of who is an Israeli, we can hypothesize that Amit's sense of identity is reminiscent of the identity associated with the Palmach generation (the heroes around the time of the Israeli War of Independence), Lee's identity mirrors a mixture of the Shenkin identity (a popular street in Tel Aviv with chic boutiques and cafés) with a desire to simply get on with her life, and Ziv appears to be striving for expression of his secular identity, which will culminate in the achievement of personal and professional peace of mind.

If we assume that one's identity is continually reconstructed over the life course (Bicket, 2001; Gergen, 1991), exploration of an individual's sense of identity becomes a complex exploration. Therefore, it requires a method that is open to complexity and possesses strategies for capturing this complexity. The life story method provides a vehicle for such inquiry, because it not only perceives the person's life story as a holistic representation of self—one that encompasses the personal and the social, inner motivations and goals with external norms and experiences—but also provides a strategy for getting at that holistic

representation. The method does not attempt to guide the story in any clear or well-defined manner; it allows the interviewees to talk about their lives in their own words, in their own time, beginning wherever they wish and continuing on in such a way until they feel that they have reached “the end,” using their own linguistic styles of personal storytelling.

If we view the construction of one’s identity as a lifelong process, then we can also assert that at times, one’s identity will be characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, contradictions, and loss of control. This should be especially true of young adults, who are often deeply in the throes of trying to understand who they are and what their place is within their social context (Erickson, 1977). For these reasons, the biographical method of interviewing can be a very relevant and sensitive method for the exploration of such an identity, given that it is a method that is not afraid of giving over control to another (in this case, the researcher insists that the autobiographer lead the way) and that deals with and sometimes appears even to encourage ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradictions. The researcher does not aim to control what happens during the interview process or to devise a neat interview package that will result in a model that exactly reproduces itself each time an interview is undertaken. By not directing the autobiographer in any way (learning not to interrupt the autobiographer during the main narrative is one of the most difficult skills that the interviewer needs to learn), the researcher lets the autobiographer know that it is legitimate to be ambiguous and to not feel the need to place clear borders around his or her life story, and that he or she can “go with the flow.” This flow might be straightforward and linear or more fluid and full of surprises, with stories that are not always congruent with one another—but all of this is okay, given that this interview process, in no small part, mirrors the construction of identity.

In my opinion, employing the life story method when researching the complex concept of identity has at least one distinct benefit for researchers: Use of this method assists us in uncovering the complexities of identity and its construction and as we further understand the concept and its expression, this helps us understand and appreciate the complexities and nuances of the research method. In the examples given above, the biographical interview method made it possible for Amit, Lee, and Ziv to talk about their lives in an open, uninterrupted, and nondirective fashion, and to develop their story and thinking as they were asked intrinsic questions that were derived from their main narratives. This, in turn, made it possible for me, as the interviewer and interpreter of these materials, to look at their life stories from a number of angles, concepts, and theories. In other words, the depth and wealth of the raw material made possible through the life story method provides very fertile ground for the postulation of different understandings that come from different disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology) and conceptual frameworks (e.g., postmodern theory, Bar-On’s 1999 conceptualization of the development of Jewish identity).

The life story method is useful not only for the study of identity but also for the research of other complex social phenomena as well—ones that are often ambiguous and evolving, with internal “contradictions.” Examples of such social phenomena include interpersonal or intergroup conflict and intergenerational or intrasocietal transmission of trauma, to name just a few. By thinking not only about the phenomenon that one wishes to explore but also about the how, it is hoped that the dual fields of methodology and social science phenomena will continue to learn from one another.

### **Notes**

1. A kibbutz is a communal rural settlement in which the members work for the good of the community and are provided with their basic needs by the community (e.g., education, health care, food, housing).  
back to text
2. These terms are often used interchangeably, and I will use both of them here.
3. All of the names are pseudonyms.

4. Sde Boker is located in the desert in Israel. It includes a campus from Ben-Gurion University and is the place where David Ben-Gurion, the architect of the Jewish State and the first Prime Minister of Israel, and his wife, Paula, were buried, after they lived in a nearby kibbutz of the same name for many years. One of Ben-Gurion's dreams was to "make the desert bloom." It is a tourist and educational spot for many Israeli adults and children.

5. The Jewish Agency was originally formed to represent the Jewish community in prestate Israel (Palestine). Its main activities include work on immigration, education, and partnerships with Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

6. The Entebbe mission was the Israeli rescue of 103 hostages from a French airliner that was hijacked by members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The plane, en route from Israel to France, was hijacked on June 27, 1976, and flown to Entebbe, Uganda. There, the hijackers released 258 non-Israeli passengers and held the rest, demanding that Israel release 53 imprisoned PLO members. In response, Israel airlifted to Uganda 100 to 200 soldiers in cargo planes escorted by fighter planes. Seven hijackers, one soldier, and three hostages were killed.

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